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## Article

# Islamophobia: With or without Islam?

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**Abstract:** Islamophobia has been a controversial concept ever since it first gained popular currency. One of the main sticking points over the term is whether or not it refers to religion. For both detractors and advocates of the term alike, religion should be or is removed from the meaning of Islamophobia, which is conceived as a form of anti-Muslim racism. Islam, we might say, is thereby removed from Islamophobia. Yet, in doing so, it falls short on two of its key objectives, i.e., identifying the particular forms of discrimination that Muslims face in society and subsequently providing a positive basis from which to address this discrimination. In this article, the question asked is if we should put Islam back into Islamophobia and, if so, on what basis? According to the existing literature as well as a study of converts to Islam, it is suggested that Islam as a religion is both an important feature of Islamophobia as well as central to the identities of many Muslims, and then it is suggested why and how we should think about including religion into the scope of thinking on Islamophobia and how it is addressed.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia; religious identity; religious hatred; ethno-religious; converts to Islam



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## 1. Introduction

Islamophobia has been a controversial concept ever since it first gained popular currency following the Runnymede Trust report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for us All* in 1997. Debates about the term itself, whether we should instead use anti-Muslim racism or anti-Muslimism for instance, as well as debates about whether it refers to religion, ethnicity, or culture, have been the focus of much academic as well as political commentary (see, for example, [Halliday 1999](#), [Allen 2010](#), [Sayyid and Vakil 2011](#), [Jackson 2018](#)).

In Britain, something of a broad, even if far from complete, consensus seemed to form following the updated Runnymede Trust report *Islamophobia: Still A Challenge for us All* ([Runnymede 2017](#)) and an All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (APPGBM) report *Islamophobia Defined* ([APPGBM 2018](#)). Both of these reports shared the definition of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism; to quote the APPGBM, “Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”.

The definition the report offered, although legally non-binding, was intended as a recommendation to government of a working definition for the purpose of identifying and addressing Islamophobia in society and policy. Reflecting a growing political consensus that the definition enjoys, it was adopted by major political parties, including the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Conservatives, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, as well as the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. This has continued, nevertheless, to arouse controversy and debate and the Conservative government rejected it as ‘unworkable’, and has continually resisted calls to address serious accusations of Islamophobia in the party, even from party insiders, most notably Baroness Sayeeda Warsi. Indeed, in a recent report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, set up by the Prime Minister in response to the Black Lives Matter protests and data showing ethnic disparities in COVID-19 infection and mortality rates, the term Islamophobia is not mentioned ([CRED 2021](#)).

It would be easy to see these disagreements as a purely political issue, one of left vs. right, ‘progressive’ anti-racists vs. conservative traditionalists, for instance, but this would

miss a vital and defining factor, one that in fact serves to highlight something of a common feature of both some supporters as well as detractors of the definition. This is the issue of religion. It is somewhat unfashionable to talk about religion, *qua* religion, in discussions and analyses of racism; however, in this article, an effort is made to directly address this aspect, since to ignore or avoid this is to misdiagnose both the problem as well as ways of addressing it and understanding the place of religion in relation to Islamophobia is an important part of tackling the issue. In short, in this article, it is argued that it is necessary to think about Islamophobia with specific attention to religion (Islam) as well as ‘race’ and ethnicity, by first, setting out in more detail the background of the definition and its theoretical conceptualisation, highlighting how the issue of religion is a central fault line. Then, some recent research is discussed that suggests that patterns of discrimination aimed at Muslims manifest in relation to religion, rather than or at least as well as ‘race’, and also brings to bear findings from a study of converts to Islam in Britain, which also helps highlight issues of religiousness. Subsequently, it is suggested on what terms we might be able to begin to think about understanding and addressing the specifically religious aspect of discrimination.

## 2. Fieldwork

In the first instance, the empirical case of converts that this article draws on are described. The article draws on a study of the narratives of twenty-seven converts to Islam in Britain, addressing aspects of identity and belonging. Participants were found predominantly through loosely affiliated convert networks connected to mosques, a national organization, and through personal contacts. Broadly reflecting the demographic background sketched in previous studies ([Brice 2010](#); [Zebiri 2008](#)), just over half the participants were white British/European, a quarter of the participants were British Asian, three participants were Black British and two participants were mixed race; nineteen were female and eight male; just under half had been previously practicing Catholic, Protestant, or Hindu, while the rest were mostly nominally Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Sikh, or Christian, with two participants describing themselves formerly as spiritual and three participants as atheist. They were aged between 18 and 69 and had been Muslim between 10 months and 30 years at the time of interview. All names have been anonymized and changed to match in origin the name they use now.

The study used a narrative interview methodology and narrative analysis ([Freeman 2013](#)), eliciting what might be called ‘conversion stories’ or ‘journeys to Islam’. These interviews lasted between one and four hours.

## 3. Islamophobia as Cultural Racism

As a term to refer to a specific form of discrimination aimed at Muslims, Islamophobia is a controversial and contested concept, the subject of much of the literature and has been conceived from alternative perspectives by different thinkers (see, for example, [Klug 2012](#)). One objection is the problem that as a way to identify a form of racism it includes ‘Islam’ rather ‘Muslim’, thereby seeming to suggest that it is about discrimination against a religion rather than people. Indeed, many attacks on the term in the rhetoric of both some right-wing groups as well as strong secularists (such as the so-called New Atheists) justify their critique, perhaps disingenuously, in these terms. Along these lines, alternative terms such as ‘anti-Muslimism’ ([Halliday 1999](#)) or ‘Muslimophobia’ ([Erdenir 2010](#)) have been suggested and some prefer to use terms such as ‘anti-Muslim hatred/prejudice’. Nevertheless, given that the definitions behind these alternative terms share sufficient features, this becomes more of a semantic issue than a substantive one, and as alternatives have not gained such traction, this is perhaps not reason in itself to switch terms.

On more substantive grounds, some have emphasized Islamophobia as the racialization of Islam (for example, [Rana 2007](#)) or of Muslims ([Garner and Selod 2015](#)). Others have rendered Islamophobia in structural terms, where it is an embedded feature of social norms and institutional governance, and this is intensified in the contemporary Western

European context marked by fears of terrorism and radicalisation associated with some forms of Islam and related to issues of securitization. Grosfoguel (2012) described it as a form of 'epistemic racism', where the inferiority of Islamic knowledge is deeply embedded in the modern system and ways of thinking, and Allen (2010) conceptualized it as an ideological position in which Islam and Muslims are made 'other' and seen as a threat. By contrast, others have focused on the negative attitudes held towards Muslims (for example, Bangstad 2014) and Pratt (2016) highlighted different types of ignorance, whether innocent or deliberate. Larsson and Sander (2015) emphasized actions rather than attitudes resulting from these types of negative perceptions. Some have asked the question of whether Muslims, or ex-Muslims, can be Islamophobic when they attack Islam or the practices of some Muslims (Larsson 2016), and others have looked at anti-Muslim hatred from other ethnic minority groups in Western European countries (for example, Sian 2013 in relation to Sikhs), or in other contexts outside of Europe (Frydenlund 2018, for instance, looks at Muslims in majority Buddhist countries). Given this variety of perspectives on conceiving Islamophobia, Pratt and Woodlock (2016) put forward the analogy of the kaleidoscope to allow for a complex and contextualised analysis of the term.

The core idea of the concept of Islamophobia that is the direct focus of this article is the one represented in the APPGBM and Runnymede reports mentioned above and the one with most traction in British debates, i.e., the concept of Islamophobia as a form of 'cultural racism', referring to the racialization of Muslims. Nevertheless, despite this more direct focus, the discussion put forward in this article also relates to the range of positions outlined above on similar grounds. That is, that they share the eschewing of religion *qua* religion in thinking about Islamophobia; how it can manifest, on the one hand, and how we might address it, on the other hand.

Stuart Hall (2000), although not associated with the term Islamophobia, argued that racism has two 'logics', one biological and one cultural, which are always in operation. The work of Tariq Modood has highlighted how conceptualisations of colour racism, and therefore of anti-racism movements built around them, were too narrowly defined and dependent upon a racial-dualist framework of a black-white binary. This understanding was unable to capture how Muslims are discriminated against, 'othered' and vilified on the basis of a perceived deep-rooted culture that is ascribed to them (Modood 2005). While Islam is a religion and not a race, 'Muslim' as a category is racialised and 'cultural' racism can exist independently from 'colour' racism, although the two may also overlap in significant ways. In this way, 'Muslim' became a salient political category, one under which Muslims themselves identified and also made claims. It is for this reason that Modood conceives Muslims in socio-political terms as an ethno-religious group, which quite deliberately brings together rather than pushes apart ethnicity and religion.

The emphasis, then, is on ethnicity and culture, and the ethno rather than the religious in ethno-religious. There are good reasons for this. As a socio-political identity it captures an important dialectic between the personal and the social, between how Muslims can face discrimination and also self-identify in ethno-religious terms and make claims on this basis, without necessarily disavowing diversity under this concept (Meer 2008). Thus, it can include instances where non-practising Muslims, or even 'atheist Muslims', face Islamophobic discrimination and abuse because they are perceived through 'Muslimness', that is, in negatively ascribed ethnic and cultural terms, which might be signified by skin colour, clothing, language, cultural practices, and so on. This kind of emphasis can also include how non-Muslims might face Islamophobic abuse and discrimination if they are perceived to be Muslim, because of skin colour, clothing, and so on. Thus, Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism is wider than, and therefore not limited to, 'race'; however, it is also not a strict religious reference or category either. The emphasis is on community's based on descent, steering clear of 'the truth of doctrines' (Modood 2019, p. 186; Meer 2008). Thus, the definition of Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism focuses on culture, ethnicity, and 'race', and eschews the religious as a specific point of reference of its own and as one distinct from 'race' and ethnicity and that requires attention of its own.

It is this eschewing of the religious that forms the common feature of both the advocates across the literature outlined above, as well as detractors of the term Islamophobia as its supposed religious basis it is also the core of many critiques of the term. Some progressive liberal discourses, for instance, are often far more comfortable with anti-racism than with overt religion. There is an often-expressed aversion to the public manifestation of religion, seeing it as anachronistic in contemporary society and even as a danger to liberal democratic debate and processes. We can see this, for example, in the supposed negative impact for Muslim women, and why for many feminists, certain practices, such as wearing a hijab or niqab, are seen as anti-feminist. Underpinning these views is a deep-seated mistrust of such forms of religion and 'tradition' that view these manifestations of religion as, at best, a benign anachronism (where it is private and discreet) and, at worst, a dangerous and oppressive ideology whose main purpose is to maintain traditional power structures that oppress certain groups, notably women and non-heterosexuals. In these positions it is racial, ethnic, sexual identities (i.e., those seen as 'involuntary') that must trump (voluntary) religious identities and that are in fact in greater need of staunch protection against religious identities. This is what constitutes the 'liberal' defence and why Muslims come to be seen as the 'illiberal other'.

Significantly, these claims contradict the claims of many Muslim women themselves, as well as much evidence from empirical studies. Woodhead (2013) argued that it was the strong, muscular liberal defence claims that in fact reflected illiberal positions. It is on these points, moreover, that we can see the strange bedfellows of liberal progressives and right-wing conservatives. For instance, a collection of essays in response to the APPGBM report was published by the right-leaning think tank Civitas, yet contained contributions from people who would not normally be considered to be on the right, certainly when it comes to issues affecting ethnic and sexual minorities, all of whom also signed an open letter calling the APPGBM definition of Islamophobia 'unfit for purpose' (Webb 2019, p. 109) on the basis that it was perceived to provide undue focus on religion.

Much of the criticism, as well as the support, of the conceptualisation of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism, therefore, turns on removing the 'Islam' from Islamophobia. For supporters of the term, it is about highlighting that it is, in fact, something of a misnomer in that regard but is really about ethnicity and culture. What we are actually talking about is an ethno-religious and not a religious term. For detractors, the invocation of religion through the term 'Islam' is a vital sticking point that distorts the very idea of racism. They emphasise that the right to criticise religion, and some religious or cultural practices, must be protected as much as racism must be combatted.

#### 4. Putting Islam into Islamophobia

Having discussed how the term Islamophobia removes Islam, in this section, we consider why we might want to put Islam back into Islamophobia, and in the subsequent section, it is suggested how we might wish to begin to do so whilst still avoiding some of the pitfalls already mentioned, namely around recognising 'the truth of doctrines' or overly limiting free speech with regard to criticising religion.

Above, it was mentioned that the conception of Muslims in ethno-religious terms rested on a dialectic view of, on the one hand, the form of discrimination on the basis of an ascribed identity, and on the other hand, a form of positive self-identification. This is significant since the former focusses on what is ascribed from the outside, while the latter adds weight to the need to address this discrimination and how to address it based on what is held to be important for the people facing discrimination. This dialectic is addressed first, and it is argued that it is important to consider Islam as a religion from both directions.

Beginning with the negative side of patterns of discrimination, in his well-known critique, Halliday (1999) argued that while it may be appropriate to characterise past forms (such as the crusades) as against Islam as a religion, contemporary discrimination is not aimed at Islam as a faith or even as a culture but at Muslims as a people, and therefore, while Islamophobia may be appropriate to characterise past forms, it is not accurate to



describe our present context. Nevertheless, recent research has shown how there has been a discursive switch from ‘race’ to Islam as a faith in expressions of Islamophobia, one which reproduces discourses of Islam as scripturally deterministic and particularly prone to violence and cultural backwardness (Jones et al. 2018). It is this form, it is argued, which focuses on negativized and stereotyped views of Islam as a religion that is now structurally important to Islamophobic discourses. Moreover, this also represents what is seen as an acceptable form of discrimination, that is, discrimination on the basis of faith is acceptable, if it passes ‘the dinner-table test’ (Warsi 2011), whereas discrimination based on ‘race’ is much less socially acceptable.

Along similar lines, a recent report has argued that religious prejudice, rather than prejudice based on nationality or ethnicity, is “the ‘final frontier’ for diversity, a place where individuals are willing to express negative attitudes” (Hargreaves et al. 2020, pp. 10, 57–58). Moreover, polls have repeatedly found that attitudes towards those who are religiously different in the UK are largely tolerant, but people feel least positive towards Muslims (Mori Ipsos 2018; Eurobarometer (EB) 2015; Ballinger 2018). Other studies have shown that religious as well as ethnic penalties are in areas such as the labour market (for example, Khattab and Modood 2015), and these might also be seen to suggest this aspect of context and manifestation of Islamophobia.

None of what has been said in the previous paragraphs is to suggest that ethnicity or culture are no longer important or relevant for identifying and explaining Islamophobia. Furthermore, intersectional lenses, which might also include attention to gender (especially given the emphasis on Muslim women in Islamophobic discourses), offer significant analytical and explanatory value. Rather, the suggestion here is that religion, or a ‘religion logic’ to discrimination, cannot and should not be ignored. The lines between religion, ethnicity, and culture are blurry rather than sharp, and making distinctions is fraught with difficulty. Nonetheless, it remains important to trace these blurry lines and to not fully conflate one with the other.

#### 4.1. Islamophobia and Converts to Islam

In this section and the following section, the discussion can be further developed with reference to forms of discrimination faced by converts to Islam in Britain<sup>1</sup> which helps further train our attention towards the significance of considering religion as well as ethnicity, perhaps not least because “political figures who argue against recognizing Islamophobia as a form of racism frequently bring out the example of converts to Islam” (Özyürek 2015, p. 376).

Converts can be seen to face Islamophobia in some ways similar to born Muslims, especially ethnic minority converts who would not be seen as converts by the majority of society. Yet, while experiencing discrimination in some ways similar to born Muslims, converts also face discrimination of both a different feel and sort, and which serves to train our attention towards the religious.

What we can also see is the blurriness between discrimination that can focus on religion but where also the religious and ethnic becomes conflated and, as we will go on to see, this creates problems themselves. As a result of converting to Islam, white converts can be ‘re-ethnicized’ and repositioned as part of the cultural landscape, no longer of the majority but part of a minority (Jensen 2008). They become religiously, and thereby culturally ‘other’, on the basis that Islam is perceived to involve certain beliefs and practices, rather than, for instance, being a religion where a great deal of variance of interpretation is applied.

Saiorse, a convert of 11.5 years, for instance, recalled the following conversation in relation to being asked about ‘the rules’ of Islam:

“It’s like, ‘Don’t you find it difficult?’ They all say, ‘Was that the hardest part?’ No, the hardest part was telling my family. It was like, ‘The rules, you can’t do this and you can’t do that. Don’t you find that difficult?’ No, just telling my family was the difficult part!”

In this passage, Saiorse expressed her frustration at people’s fixation on the perception of Islamic ‘rules’ and their strictness, even when she tries to explain that other things, such as telling her family, were in fact what was difficult. It is significant that it is precisely this kind of perception and discourse on Islam that is present in the wider socio-cultural context that goes a long way to producing the kind of anxiety Saiorse experienced in this regard.

Richard also provides an example of a further way in which religion is highlighted as a focus for negative discrimination and abuse. As has previously been noted, one of the key points of resistance to the term Islamophobia is that it cannot be a term to understand racism because its focus, and the critique it refers to, is religion and not race. Paul Hedges, highlights that this view “totally fails to understand the dynamics behind the prejudice. People do not get attacked in the street after it has been ascertained whether they are Muslim or not . . . ” (Hedges 2021, p. 135). Here, then, Hedges quite rightly points out that people are attacked on the basis of visible markers (skin colour, clothing, and so on) based on the assumption that this signifies they belong to a particular group, and he uses the case of white converts being called ‘race traitors’ as one example. Nevertheless, this also misses two important points. The first point is that people can be attacked in the street once their Muslimness has been ascertained in the absence of visible markers. Richard, who when I met him was wearing blue jeans and a blue hoody, contrasted himself to other converts who had started wearing a thawb, grown beards, and adopted other aspects perceived as ‘traditional’ of Islam upon conversion. He saw this as unnecessary in the British context and did not distinguish himself as Muslim in any publicly visible way. Yet, shouting “you’re a disgrace to your country” a man had physically attacked him in the street when he was seen entering a mosque, and thereby identified as Muslim. Passing unnoticed as Muslim the majority of the time, Richard generally avoids these kinds of instances, but when something else other than a physical marker indicates that he is Muslim, he can receive the same kind of abuse. This suggests that physical signifiers are just that, signifiers, and here they signify his belonging to a religion that is perceived by his assailant as alien and dangerous.

A further way of highlighting the negative views and discrimination on the basis of religion is demonstrated by several cases where converts initially hid their conversion from their families. Simran, who was brought up Sikh, tried this until eventually telling her parents, and at the time of the interview, her mother still was not speaking to her. Richard again provides a good example of this. Richard had been raised Roman Catholic and at one point earlier in his life had considered entering the priesthood. Anticipating his family’s negative reaction to his conversion to Islam, he hid the fact from them for three years. For Richard, this was to prevent his family from being able to say, “‘Oh he’s different since he became Muslim. Oh, you can see he’s gone weird.’ So, I thought no, I won’t say anything, and then you can’t use that line”. Richard’s tactic, then, was to be able to say that as they had not noticed a great change in him, they could not object to his becoming Muslim, yet this proved unsuccessful, and at the time we met, four years after his conversion, his mother still refused to speak to him.

In contrast to white converts, ethnic minority converts are already racialized as other and go unnoticed as converts by the white majority. As such, they can face discrimination in a similar way to born Muslims; Zaara related being shouted at in the street when she was with her children and being called a ‘terrorist bitch’, for example. Ethnic minority converts also, nevertheless, often face discrimination from their more immediate community based on negativized views of Muslims and Islam and can be seen to ‘betray’ their background, family, and community as a result of conversion. Rizwan, who was brought up Hindu, was physically beaten and had to leave home. Zaara, who was brought up Hindu/Sikh, was ostracized by her family; Simran situated the animosity she experienced at close hand

in the 'bad blood' that continues to exist between Sikh and Muslim communities stemming from the 'backdrop' of post-partition politics.

The examples above speak to the point that what is often objected to, and what was consistently highlighted by converts I spoke to, was their beliefs and values, whether actual or perceived, having become Muslim. What we might say, then, is just as religion may be used to incite racial hatred (Meer 2008; Modood 2007; Jackson 2018), it might also be a matter of religious hatred. That is to say, while we might point to the racialisation of religion, the danger with this is that it too often runs the risk of reducing religion to 'race', and thereby not enough thought has been given to religion more specifically. The argument, in this article, is that considering religion qua religion is an important addition to our understanding of and thinking about Islamophobia.

The discussion, in this section so far, has been focused on the negative side of discrimination and how the religious is a significant factor in these forms, something that is generally underappreciated in work on Islamophobia. Now, it is important to also turn to the positive side of identity, that is, how for some it is their religious, rather than ethnic, identity that forms an important or even main point of orientation for self-understanding and social relations. The importance of this turn is that it has implications for how we think about addressing Islamophobia.

#### *4.2. The Positive Side of Religious Identity*

As above, before turning to consider converts, we can begin by noting how with regard to some born Muslims, religious rather than ethnic identity is emphasized. The studies that have focussed on young Muslims in Britain have highlighted that, for many of those young Muslims, their religious Muslim identity is felt to be more important than a 'cultural' Muslim identity, and, moreover, that this is not in contestation with their national identity as British (Jacobson 1997; DeHanas 2016). Here, the religious aspect of identity is stressed against both a secular society in which religion, and Islam in particular, has become increasingly seen as a problem, as well as against parents, grandparents, and even peers whose interpretation of Islam is seen to be 'cultural' and not able to speak to their lives as young people in Britain.

There is also a parallel in relation to converts, by the different ways in which religious identity are foregrounded in this relation and expressed through the narratives. One way is through theological reflections. A common feature was a lack of fit between their own sense of religiosity and the religious tradition they were brought up in, or even, following some experimentation, that of other religious traditions. Here, a common theme is the perceived emptiness between the religion, or none, they were brought up in and what they find in Islam. Adele, who had previously been a practising Catholic, commented, for example, that "it's kind of like something people do traditionally and culturally now rather than it being something that people follow as a faith" and this caused her to feel like 'a stranger' in her local church and in Catholicism. For Vidya and Sanjay, both brought up Hindu; Hinduism was likewise 'more about culture and tradition'.

Rosie came to reject her atheist upbringing and also looked at different religions before coming to Islam. She describes, for instance, investigating Buddhism:

"I actually had some friends who were Buddhists and I went to a few of their chanting sessions and it was weird, it was really weird. As I approached the house it sounded like a swarm of bees inside and I was thinking to myself 'ooh I am not sure about this now'. And they were all sitting there chanting words that they did not understand and I didn't understand it. I kind of got the sense they were all collectively getting high on the rhythm of the words and I didn't like that."

She goes on to relate a conversation she had with the teacher at the end of the session, probing him on various matters such as enlightenment, which led her to conclude that, to her, it seemed more like a 'dressed up atheism' for theological and philosophical reasons.



Instances such as these serve to exemplify that it would be a mistake to divorce the overtly theological from converts' religious identities. This is not to reduce them to matters of doctrine but to highlight the centrality of diverse and considered processes of religious identification. My participants consistently and continually emphasised religious reflection and explanation, emphasising foremost their religiousness for their sense of self.

It could also be suggested that the fact that many remain Muslims, in the face of the seriousness of the suffering converts can face, from society more widely, friends, family, and born Muslim communities, attests to the strength of this sense of being Muslim.

## 5. Religious Discrimination and Equal Respect

The preceding discussion has attempted to establish the following: There is a specifically religious component to Islamophobia in patterns of prejudice aimed at Muslims which has, so far, not been given enough attention in thinking on Islamophobia and that the religion is also specifically and centrally relevant to the self-conception of many, both born Muslims and converts. In so doing, what the discussions of both the negative as well as positive sides of identity suggest is that what is needed are conversations about religion and religious identity, and here, specifically Islam and being Muslim.

To identify these dynamics as important to discussions of Islamophobia begs further questions. The political point of identifying Islamophobia as a particular form of racism is of course to enable it to be addressed with the goal of achieving greater equality. This was the reason for the APPGBM report and definition, "to marshal the political will and the necessary policy and institutional response to seriously and robustly tackle what we contend is Britain's bigotry blind-spot: Islamophobia" (APPGBM 2018, p. 18). Importantly, however, "our business in adopting our definition is not to interfere with the right of individuals to criticise Islam or engage Muslims in critical discussions about their religion" (APPGBM 2018, p. 18). This is the issue that this section considers, i.e., what are the implications of the arguments made in the previous section for the right to freely criticise Islam as a religion? Particularly, if we highlight religiousness in self-conception as an important factor in thinking about how to address Islamophobia, what does this mean for how we relate to religious others and the right to criticise religion? This, of course, is also central to the critiques of the term Islamophobia itself as well as the definition of Muslims in ethno-religious terms, and thus is a question relevant to the positions found amongst the terms detractors as well as advocates.

First, we can say something more about why the focus is on ethno-religious identities in active avoidance of religious identities qua religion. There is a legitimate concern that recognition of religious identity entails endorsing beliefs or religious truths, or cements religious identity as somehow involuntary, thereby limiting freedom of conscience. This, for instance, is why Modood is careful to point out that we are not talking about 'the truth of doctrines', and this is quite right. Caution over recognising the 'truth of doctrines' is appropriate, especially if we are thinking about political recognition by the state. Here, we can also highlight that, in Britain, religion or belief is one of nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, protecting against discrimination across social spheres, and incitement to hatred, or so-called 'hate speech', against protected characteristics is also covered by law. What we are not talking about is extending specific laws to protect against religious critique that is not covered by existing legislation and deals with incitement to hatred. We might also note that blasphemy laws in England and Wales were repealed in 2008 with no great fuss.

The emphasis is rather on equal respect. On the one hand, Islamophobia as a term enables us to identify where and how discrimination undermines equal respect, and, on the other hand, to recognise what identity category is meaningful for those who hold it in a positive as well as negative sense if equal respect is to be achieved. The reason for this is that equal respect is central to why Islamophobia, as a form of cultural racism focussed on an ethno-religious category, has become an important term.

An important requirement, here, is to take seriously the ‘reality’ and meaningfulness of culture and ethnicity, or why and how humans are ‘cultural beings’ (Parekh 2006, p. 125; Werbner 2001). It is this recognition that forms the basis of arguments for why cultural racism needs to be addressed and that arguments for equal respect are one way of doing so. This is fair enough, but it does not explain why humans as cultural beings are a riper basis for equal respect than humans as religious beings, or why a critique on the basis of religion is more appropriate than a critique on the basis of culture, and it leads to a position where religion-as-group-identity is opposed to religion-as-faith without seeing the profound and socio-political connections between the two. This is especially problematic if we consider religion to be a source of normative moral authority quite distinct from culture (Song 2009). Moreover, arguments for equal respect on the basis of humans as ‘cultural beings’ do not intend to inure against a critique on the basis of cultural practices, but rather establish a way of relating to others that recognises them as equal citizens and humans and avoids prejudicial and harmful stereotypes and discrimination. Therefore, there is no reason why it cannot be extended to people on the basis of being ‘religious beings’ in a similar fashion. Equal respect calls us to be attentive to what is meaningful for the bearers of identities as well as to identify the bases of discrimination.

If we accord equal respect on the basis of religion but avoid the ‘truth of doctrines’ or circumscribing a critique of religion, we need to ask what such equal respect should look like. To begin to do so, we can usefully draw on five ‘tests’, posed as questions, to delineate between reasonable criticism and Islamophobia proposed by Modood (2020), and referred to in the APPGBM report. The questions are relevant to considering issues of equal respect when it comes to Islamophobia, not least because they emphasise how debate and engagement is conducted as much as its content. By focussing on the how and not the what, we can avoid circumscribing particular statements or content and so on in advance, instead, placing the emphasis on the context in which they take place, which are discussed in the following section, with religion specifically in mind.

#### *Equal Respect and Islamophobia*

The first question Modood asks is ‘Does it stereotype Muslims by assuming they all think the same?’ The central aspects to the structural shift in Islamophobia referred to above focus on Islam as an inherently backward (especially with regard to gender roles and relations) and violent religion. What this question points to is that there are multiple and various ways of reading and interpreting religious scripture and its implications for belief and practice. For instance, arguing that secular feminisms are unable to capture either their experiences as women or as religious women, many Muslim women, by contrast, articulate a particular Islamic feminism to both address gendered issues within Muslim communities as well as their place in a multicultural Britain, negotiate both communalist as well as universalist discourses (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012; McGinty 2007), and adopt various stances on the issues. We can also note, given that converts were discussed in preceding sections, that converts vary greatly in their understandings of Islam, and a questioning spirit was for many what brought them to Islam and turned them away from their religion (or none) of upbringing. Presupposing variance and contestation better reflects the empirical reality of relations and positions between and within Muslim communities and also better reflects an attitude of equal respect when engaging with co-citizens, especially on topics so deeply meaningful as religion.

The second question is ‘Is it about Muslims or a dialogue with Muslims, which they would wish to join in?’ An example of the distinction here can be seen in how Rosie talked about how she would consistently question a Muslim friend of hers in order to outsmart and out argue her on religion, feminism, and other topics. Following the realisation that she needed to question her own atheism, but before she came to Islam, her questions began to change from trying to ‘debunk everything (her friend) believe(d) in’ to asking about what she believed in with an open curiosity. This example is not of course meant to suggest that dialogue would result in conversion! And there will be different reasons for such

engagements. Rather, the example points to the difference in why and how, in this instance, Rosie engaged with her friend. The first way did not accord her friend equal respect, instead seeing her religious faith as somehow anachronistic and deserving of ridicule. In this way, it also reflects another of Modood's questions, 'Is it a matter of insincere criticism for ulterior motives?' In this example, the initial motive was to show how her friend's faith and reasoning was inferior (and we might include here also some strong secularist as well as far-right attacks). Following the switch, however, her motives and methods are more genuinely enquiring. Whether she came to agree with her on some, any, or all the points is not what is important, it is the mode and manner of the engagement that determines whether it is a matter of equal respect or not. This also reflects another of Modood's questions, 'Is the language civil and contextually appropriate?' While in the first phase of the example just given, Islam was the target of deliberate offense, in the second phase, equal respect characterized the interaction.

The final of Modood's questions is 'Do the terms of the debate allow possible mutual learning?' This serves to highlight an important contextual aspect of how Islamophobia may 'pass the dinner table test' or why religion may be the 'final frontier' for diversity and equality, one which Grace Davie has observed. [Davie \(2015\)](#) highlighted two simultaneous trends. On the one hand, religion has re-arisen as a salient and prominent public issue, as a result of Britain becoming a society characterized by extra-Christian religious diversity, and which has brought various challenges. On the other hand, this has occurred at the same time as religious literacy has declined, that is, our ability to discuss and understand religious lives has diminished alongside a rising need to be able to have public discussions about religion. As Davie has elsewhere noted, in a context where understandings of secular and religious are based on opposition, there is a lack of vocabulary to be able to have serious conversations about religion. The 'paradox' of this lack of vocabulary occurring at the same time as these questions are increasingly important for parts of the population and in public debates that have arisen as a result of Britain as multireligious, results in an "ill-mannered and ill-informed" debate about religion in society ([Davie 2012](#), p. 283). This is not to suggest that everyone needs to develop deep theological knowledge or that dialogue is necessarily theological at all, this would be too demanding. More simply, Davie's observations point to how openness to mutual learning as a matter of equal respect too often does not constitute the terms of debates. To put this another way, equal respect, rather than characterizing the debate itself, is something that the purpose of the debate can seek to withhold if religiousness as a frame of orientation and meaning for (some) humans as 'religious beings' is dismissed a priori. Therefore, the issue is not about recognising religious beliefs, truth of doctrines, or protecting religions against critique, but to think about how we approach co-citizens with equal respect.

## 6. Conclusions

Islamophobia is a contested concept. For its advocates, it is an important anti-racist concept in the struggle against discrimination that Muslims face. For its detractors, it is, at best, an inaccurate and distracting term and, at worst, one that proposes limits to free speech, in particular the right to criticise religion. At the centre of this contestation, in some ways, is a debate over terminology and definition and the distracting 'Islam' that forms the notion, although some in the second camp would be equally wary of terms such as 'cultural racism'. Nevertheless, what both camps share is an aversion or at least avoidance to the inclusion of religion as either a problematic focus of discrimination that needs tackling or as a positive category of identification and meaning. In so far as this is the case, we might say that "how you view Islamophobia depends upon how you view Islam" ([Salma Yaqoob, quoted in Birt 2013](#), p. 217). Is Islam, as a religion, quite rightly the focus of criticism and ridicule and this should not be qualified? On this basis, is Islamophobia meaningless or something to be cautious of, or is Islam eschewed to instead focus on Muslims as an ethno-religious category, in which case, Islam per se is not a relevant factor? On this basis Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism.

In this article, the discussion borrows something from both of these positions. First, there has been a focus on Islam as a religion, which, however, has not led to argue either that Islamophobia does not exist or is not an important issue in need of addressing. This is because the second position borrows the basis of the need for equal respect in our engagements with others in society and identifies that distinctive forms of religious discrimination can be discerned in Islamophobic discourses, suggesting that it would be an error to too readily reduce instances of religious discrimination to merely and simply being ethnic discrimination in disguise. Considering the case of converts necessarily calls us to look at this more carefully. It also addresses where (Islamic) religious identity is not just the negative site of discrimination, but the positive side of self-identity, and thereby could form the basis of claims made in society in important ways. Finally, it is argued that the basis of equal respect can be extended on the basis of ‘religious being’ as well as ‘cultural being’; therefore, forcing us to think about how more engaged and productive conversations about Islam, and religion more generally, in society might take place. In these ways, the discussion, in this article, has attempted to motivate thinking about whether and how Islam could or should be put back into Islamophobia and why this is necessary in order to counter it.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a parallel discussion which expands on discrimination faced by converts as well as the idea of converts themselves being Islamophobic, see [Sealy \(forthcoming\)](#).

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